Contacts that matter

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Polish-German stereotypes have varied across time and have been heavily dependent on the period in history, people's personal experiences and the political climate. As such, they have often been used to manipulate Polish and German societies. Formed and transformed by the changing realities, they have influenced the ways in which Polish and Germans view one another.

The term 'stereotype' was introduced in 1922 by an American journalist, Walter Lippmann. In his book titled Public Opinion Lippmann wrote that everyone carries a small picture inside their heads, which constitutes a form of generalisation of a group whose members are attributed certain features without exception and despite differences between them. Importantly, these features do not have to bear negative connotations, as stereotypes are often positive. Social psychologists and philosophers alike note that stereotypes are often determined by cultural factors and do not always relate to facts, although they may be based on experience.

The development and constant redefinition of Polish-German stereotypes have been highly influenced by travel and social accounts, historical events and political rhetoric. In the 18th century Poland was seen by German travellers as not only underdeveloped but also as linguistically, culturally and religiously homogenous. What they saw upon arrival usually contrasted with their preconceived vision. Thanks to accounts from these travellers, the image of Poland gradually changed. During the partition of the country until the 1830-1831 Polish-Russian war, also known as the November Uprising, Germans were generally sympathetic towards Polish independence movements and used the name "Poland" in a gesture of solidarity with the cause.

Poland at the time was described with reference to its regions while the question of nationality did not appear to be important. According to Bernhard Struck, it was only around the 1830s that the concept of a border and the idea of German unification first arose. After the suppression of the November Uprising in Poland, Poles began to be seen in a negative light and the expression Polnische Wirtschaft was coined, which referred to the supposed wastefulness, bad manners and untidiness of Poles.

Pro-Polish attitudes have also gradually disappeared. Even the German liberals who knew the Polish elite, and saw Poland as the gateway to Europe and an ally against Russia, were soon influenced by the Prussian rhetoric. The liberal pro-Polish narrative with its roots in 1848 was silenced by voices calling for security enhancement and national egoism.

The image of Poland changed completely. The initial view of a multi-ethnic, multicultural entity with a brave, educated and patriotic population was replaced by stereotypes emphasising wastefulness and backwardness.

The cooling of political Polish-German relations and the rise of negative stereotypes have been accompanied by the virtual disappearance of a dialogue. After the uprisings the Polish elite migrated abroad and Germans travelling to Poland lost the opportunity to build lasting contacts in the country. Without the social and cultural elite any exchange of information and mutual understanding became all but impossible. The lack of dialogue resulted in a new way of writing about Poland; from the outside and focused on differences between “us” and “them”.

This process of stereotype formation shows how simple it is to manipulate collective images and exploit them for political purposes. It also shows that distance and the lack of dialogue can help negative stereotypes to flourish. When travellers had direct contact with the locals, knew their views and participated in cultural and knowledge exchange – new positive stereotypes were formed and the view of one another improved. On the contrary, negative political narratives and the lack of relations led to the creation of negative stereotypes.

The current attitudes of Poles towards Germans mostly have their roots in the Second World War, and concentration camps still top the polls when it comes to the main connotations with Germany. In 1991, 62 per cent of Poles (according to Allensbach Institute research) pointed to the Second World War as an obstacle in Polish-German relations. In 2009 it was only 39 per cent (Institute of Public Affairs research), 40 per cent responded that the event has had a low influence on the current relations and 12 per cent claimed that it has had absolutely no influence.

These changes have been determined by the emergence of a new generation. The first generation which has not viewed Germans through the prism of the Second World War is the generation of people born in the 1960s; they declare a much more positive attitude to their western neighbours than the older generation. The generational change in the stereotypical view of German people has been historically determined, as those born in the 1970s observed the beginning of reconciliation talks. The generation of the 1980s sees Germany as an ally in Poland’s EU aspirations.

The turning point in Polish-German relations was marked by the signing of the German-Polish Border Treaty in 1990, which endorsed the existing borders on the Oder and Neisse rivers. In addition, it included a formula on the resignation of both sides from territorial claims and confirmed the territorial integrity and sovereignty of both countries. The provisions of the treaty were the result of a years-long process which started at the end of the Second World War and which were subject to mutual disagreements. Only after the endorsement of the de facto borders could the two countries start building neutral or positive images of each other.

The Treaty of Good Neighbourship and Friendly Cooperation signed in 1991 constitutes another important event in Polish-German relations. Its purpose was to agree on a common historical narrative and facilitate a new beginning in cooperation between the two countries. Such a reconciliation was necessary given the changes which took place in both countries, such as the unification of Germany and the collapse of communism in Poland. The Treaty endorsed sovereignty of both states, the inviolability of borders and placed citizens in the centre of politics. It also condemned all totalitarian and discriminatory movements. In addition, according to Allensbach Institute research, over half of the German population and 82 per cent of Polish respondents at the time believed that the Treaty would improve relations within Europe.

The 1990s saw a substantial increase in positive attitudes towards Germany in Poland. However, around 1997 these attitudes deteriorated again as Germany started being seen as an economic threat to Polish interests (32 per cent of respondents), a country with territorial claims (16 per cent), or a country which was aiming to buy out Polish land (22 per cent). Nevertheless, Polish-German relations at the time were still referred to as “very good” or “good” by 76 per cent of Poles and by 38 per cent of Germans.

Another turning point in mutual relations was Poland’s accession to the European Union. Poles started perceiving Germans as allies in their European aspirations and almost half of Polish respondents thought that Germany was involved in drafting of the Accession Treaty. However, the closer it came to Poland’s EU accession, the more the Germans feared it. According to the Allensbach Institute, in 2004 when asked about the consequences of EU expansion, German respondents mentioned the increase in criminality (71 per cent) and unemployment rise (64 per cent). After the accession Germans believed that Poland would stay on the way to further EU integration (42 per cent), try to force its own interests (47 per cent) or intensify internal conflicts within the EU (45 per cent). At the same time, Polish respondents’ positive attitude towards Germany did not decrease and in 2008, according to the Institute of Public Affairs, 61 per cent viewed Germany’s influence on the EU in a positive light.

Furthermore, Polish knowledge about the German people has improved and so has the frequency of relations which has positively affected the image of the German people in Poland. In 2006, 30 per cent of Poles had a positive view of their western neighbours, who were seen as hard working, orderly, disciplined and wealthy. Among the negative qualities, Polish respondents most often pointed to German attitudes of superiority and arrogance, but also increasingly noticed similarities between the two nations. Nevertheless, while sympathy towards the Germans has been on the rise, the dominant attitude is still neutrality (44 per cent of respondents according to the Institute of Public Affairs).

When it comes to the Germans, the prevailing connotations with Poland were negative or neutral, although the number of positive associations has gradually increased. Poles began to be seen as hard-working, resourceful, tolerant, disciplined and responsible and less Germans now see them as backward or dishonest. After Poland's EU accession in 2004, the country has been increasingly associated with economic growth, but also with poverty. Nevertheless, among those who emphasised the similarities between the two countries, the vast majority attributed positive qualities to Poles. Such an ambivalent positon is related to the fact that few Germans possess detailed knowledge about Poland. According to Mateusz Fałkowski, some Germans might still see Poland as not meeting western standards in the social, economic and political sphere.

For many years positive attitudes towards the Germans have been on the rise in Poland and the co-operation between public institutions, churches and NGOs of the two countries has increased. The mutual relations, however, depend not only on the openness and will of the citizens, but also on small and big issues, as well as political and media rhetoric. Nationalist attitudes often harm such relations. Above all, the view of the other is formed by common history, memory and social awareness. According to research, people with higher levels of education are less likely to be discriminative and xenophobic. The rise in positive attitudes is also generated by close relations with members of the other group. As the Look Beyond Borders – Refugees and Europeans video by Amnesty International shows, even a brief period of close contact might suffice to eliminate simplifying stereotypes and prejudice.

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